The Israeli-Palestinian Water Conflict: An Israeli Perspective

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This paper uses detailed information about water supply systems presently serving Israelis and Palestinians in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) to evaluate claims by the Palestinians of inequitable allocation and water usage between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). The Israeli Water Authority released this data, previously classified due to political sensitivities, in 2009 for the first time after the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement (Oslo II) in 1995. It is presented in this paper along with new maps, tables and graphs. The issue of water scarcity affecting both entities could be changed from a source of controversy and tension to one of understanding and cooperation if both sides are prepared to start planning future water supply plants together. Cooperation based on sustainable development and advanced technologies can solve the real water deficiency. The paper presents several practical plans to efficiently overcome the water shortages faced by both sides.

The paper provides valuable background information on the development of the water supply systems in Judea and Samaria, starting in the 1900. Reviewing the three periods, namely, the British Mandate (1917-1948) – 25 million cubic meters per year (MCM/Y), Jordanian rule (1948-1967) – 66 MCM/Y, and Israeli Administration (1967-1995) – 120 MCM/Y, it provides a very telling story about the water situation and incremental water supply and coverage. At the post-1995 period, during which the Interim Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians was implemented, the water consumption of the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria increased to above 200 MCM/Y. As a result, there is no difference today in the per capita consumption of natural water between Israelis and Palestinians. The large difference that existed in 1967, when the administration of Judea and Samaria was handed over from Jordan to Israel, has been reduced over the last 50 years and is now negligible. As well, the per capita domestic water consumption of the Palestinians is significantly higher than the minimum human needs defined by the World Health Organization.

The paper reviews the water-related agreements signed between Israel and the PA since 1995 and their implementation. It reviews the Gaza water agreement signed as part of the Oslo I agreement in 1994, and the Judea and Samaria water agreement signed as part of the Oslo II agreement in 1995. Both sides agreed to prevent contamination and treat sewage effluents. The implementation of the agreements was executed by a Joint Water Commission (JWC) that meets on a regular basis and is in charge of approving the construction of water supply systems (including wells) and sewage installations. However, while Israel has ensured that nearly all Palestinian villages and towns are connected to running water, the Palestinians have violated their part of the agreement by
refusing to build sewage treatment plants (despite available international financing). Moreover, the Palestinians have drilled hundreds of unlicensed wells and set up unauthorized connections to Israeli water supply pipelines.

The last part of the paper deals with the legal aspects of the agreements between Israel and the PA. It shows that the Palestinians have little basis for their water demands according to international legal norms. First, the signed water agreement overrules all other parameters. Second, Israel's historical possession of the Mountain Aquifer was established in the 1940s and is unconnected to the Occupation. Third, the Palestinians should not exploit groundwater from the Western Aquifer, which is fully utilized by Israel, before first exploiting groundwater from the non-utilized Eastern Aquifer. Finally, the Palestinians should be working to pay individually for their water consumption, to prevent leaks in domestic pipelines, to implement conservative irrigation techniques, and to reuse sewage water for irrigation. The fact that they have taken none of these steps and have not adopted any sustainable development practices precludes their demands for additional water from Israel.

Instead of debating on legal aspects, a practical approach is suggested for future development, as was successfully applied in many cases elsewhere (e.g., Mekong, Indus). Part of the practical approach is the suggested improved water use efficiency both in residential and agricultural use, joint investment in non-traditional water sources (desalination), and the double dividend investment in treating and recycling wastewater. The paper has put forth a plan that can efficiently and quickly solve the current and future water shortages on both sides. The proposed plan would supply the sufficient quantity of water needed at least until 2030 and still leave some reserves.